

## *My Journey with Inductive Bible Study*

Joseph R. Dongell

Asbury Theological Seminary

joe.dongell@asburyseminary.edu

As with everything else, the backstory of my journey with IBS should not be overlooked. A natural place to begin is with my parents, Herbert and Virginia (Swauger) Dongell, who modeled before me a deep reverence and love for Scripture. Their Bibles were well-worn, filled with their own handwritten comments and with dates marking how specific passages had ministered to their souls on a particular day. And their daily searching of Scripture led into their daily prayer, usually alone behind the closed bedroom door, but loud enough to be heard, though not understood, by us children. And so the message came through to me from the very beginning, without much preaching at me, that the prayerful study of Scripture was the primary foundation of vibrant Christian life and ministry.

There was never any idea of competition between genuine piety and academic study. Both of my parents were the products of Houghton College, and both counted among their dearest mentors teachers who lived out a union between the two. How could it be otherwise if God was the God of all truth? My father in particular, who would add several academic degrees behind his name and serve as biblical studies professor at two Christian colleges, was a precious example of one with

a heart that was humble and a mind that was eager to learn. I remember that he often preached in camp meetings and revival services right out of his Greek New Testament, though he never drew attention to it. On the coffee table beside his easy chair where he had his daily devotions were books on prayer and Christian holiness, mixed in with others on NT textual criticism or archaeology. Largely because of my parents, I never had to figure out how to unite the spiritual quest with the intellectual quest as a growing disciple.

Another part of my inheritance, perhaps drawn more from my grandparents, was a love of analysis, of pressing through to understand how things worked underneath it all. From an early age, I was fascinated with machinery and took apart more contraptions, motors, and devices than I ever succeeded in putting back together! But I wanted to see what made them “tick.” Gaining traction alongside this curiosity were two other loves that began maturing during my high school years: a love for chemistry and a love for grammar. Both of these fields drew me deeper into trying to understand how systems worked and how they had power to explain the phenomena of the real world.

I began college as a chemistry major, happily contemplating a career in that field. But as I worked one evening in the lab, a strange but clear awareness settled on me. Though I heard no words, these words were impressed so clearly on my mind that I have remembered them distinctly for over forty-five years: “Chemistry is wonderful, but there is something far more wonderful than chemistry!” I knew this had to be “the Lord’s work.” This constituted my call to ministry, a call that was clear though in no way defined. I knew I was called, but it would take years to discern what form my ministry should take.

What was clear was my growing hunger for Scripture. I changed my major, signing up for Greek and Bible courses. Here I must mention the professor (at Central Wesleyan College, now Southern Wesleyan University, in Central, SC) who opened my eyes to the wonder and joy of studying Scripture, Marling Elliott. The hallmarks of his

teaching were these: first, a profound humility that allowed him frequently to say, “I don’t know.” I had thought that a Bible professor should already know everything! Wasn’t that how they earned their status? Didn’t their jobs consist essentially of informing their listeners of what they themselves knew? But with Prof. Elliott, his oft-repeated “I don’t know” meant that he had let go of this notion, had discovered how much we really didn’t know about Scripture, and was now interested in inviting us students into a real adventure of serious research and discovery. I came to see that few discoveries can be made without first admitting one’s ignorance. Prof. Elliott encouraged me toward that admission, helping me then to open the door to experiencing the amazing freedom rising from it.

The second and third hallmarks of Elliott’s teaching really belong together, and created in me a perfect receptivity for IBS as I would later encounter it. On one hand, Elliott was a master of asking questions of the biblical text because, on the other hand, he was also a master of observing the biblical text. As a young college student I was amazed at how regularly his patient, thoughtful, and careful work with texts would yield up rich insights that had eluded us. Most of these insights were harvested right from the texts themselves, right from under our noses, though we hadn’t seen them in our haste and carelessness. It was from Elliott that I learned to “read the text,” then to “read it again,” then to “read it again.”

When I arrived at Asbury Seminary in the Fall of 1978, my passion for pressing ahead in biblical studies suggested to my advisor that I petition to enter (what was then called) the “Specialized Curriculum.” This would allow me to set aside certain courses in the “practical disciplines” in order to spend those hours more directly in biblical studies. But I discovered, to my mild consternation, that I would still be required to take several “EB” courses. “What? English Bible?” I surely didn’t succeed at hiding my disappointment over this affront. I had taken at least six Greek courses in college, had purchased and used all

of the (then-available) advanced Greek grammars, and had read several key texts on exegetical method. To now be required to take “English Bible” felt like a giant step backward in my educational journey, a regrettable waste of time and money.

And so in early September of 1978, I went “quite unwillingly” (here I intend a tongue-in-cheek allusion to Wesley’s Aldersgate experience!) to a morning “English Bible” course taught by Robert Traina. I had heard of him a short time earlier and was aware only that he had written a book on Bible study method. As I recall, the first several weeks of “Mark EB” started a bit slowly for me, as I was still captive to my faulty expectations about what “EB” was all about. But by the third or fourth week, I began to realize that a new and unexpected world was opening before me.

Traina was a gifted and enthusiastic teacher, highly skilled at laying out both content and method with remarkable speed and depth. But what began to capture me more than those traits was the nature of the method he was proposing, for three specific reasons. First, the thoroughness and fulness of the method helped me envision as never before the whole movement from beginning to end that included (at least in principle) all of the other exegetical practices, theological explorations, and applicational strategies that I had already been learning to value. I began to see how and where to plug in (and integrate) all sorts of matters I knew to be important but had not yet incorporated into my own Bible study approach. I’m not sure that any of my assignments for Traina in any of my three seminary classes with him ever achieved this full synthesis, but the seeds were sown, and the ideal was projected that would draw me forward toward it.

Second, it was through Traina that the idea of “books-as-wholes” really took hold. Now I’m sure that I had already known that each of the books of the Bible likely had its own message, its own outline, and its own way of beginning and ending. Every study Bible offers such analysis. But Traina pushed far beyond these generalities, pressing us

to determine *much more exactly and precisely*, just how the various portions of a book interacted with each other to create the finished whole. According to the thoroughness of his method, we were required to demarcate and name the textual units in their ascending (and descending) hierarchies and to specify the structural relationships that bound them together.

And in mentioning structural relationships, I arrive at the third distinct contribution that Traina made to my thinking. My world had been focused on grammatical structure, on the relationships binding words and phrases to each other to form clauses and sentences. And while I was faintly aware of larger textual structures, it was through Traina that I saw more clearly this higher level of textual organization (Nida called them “Secondary Semantic Configurations”) that brought order and meaning to the inter-relationships between various units of text (including, but also *larger than* the clause and the sentence). Through Traina’s “Structural Laws,” I was introduced to a set of relationships operating between sentences, paragraphs, segments, sections, and so on. What a boon that was to my understanding of how biblical texts “worked”!

By the time my seminary education was coming to an end, I had become keenly aware that Robert Traina had changed my outlook on Bible study forever and had equipped me in ways I could never have acquired otherwise. The three courses I took from him (Mark, Romans, Pentateuch) so deeply impacted me that I determined to seek him out on the day of my graduation (after all grades had been turned in and my diploma had been granted!) to tell him personally that he was among the three most influential mentors of my seminary career. I’m sure that Traina was accustomed to receiving that sort of accolade from students, but for students like me, it felt almost like a moral imperative to express directly to him my gratitude for his ministry to me.

Now every good student must retain a degree of independence in thinking, in curiosity, and in unwillingness to accept things simply on

the authority of even our worthiest teachers (to paraphrase the words of another mentor of mine, Bob Lyon). And so I did find myself a bit suspicious about those “Structural Laws” that Traina had taught us. Yes, I did find them intuitively convincing and pragmatically effective in textual analysis. But doubt arose in my mind in the form of three questions that plagued me. First, “Laws? Says who?” The very terminology (of a “law”) was off-putting to me as if a conference of authoritative scholars had been convened somewhere and had passed binding legislation on the rest of us that named these relationships as “laws.” Such a conference, of course, had never happened!

Second, my analytical mind kept asking, “How many ‘laws’ are there? Perhaps there existed more than those listed by Traina.” With this question, I was essentially asking whether the set of laws was bounded. If the set was bounded, why was it bounded? And if it was not bounded, how many other ‘laws’ might there be beyond the canon we had been taught?

Third, I was dissatisfied with Traina’s appeal to the famous literary/art critic, John Ruskin, as a sufficient authority for identifying and interpreting these “Structural Laws.” Ruskin had seen in the paintings of skilled artists certain principles of organization at work in, say, a landscape scene. The thoughtful observer could perhaps detect repetition, or radiation, or contrast, or curvatures that organized various visual elements into a pleasing whole. Taking his cue from such visual strategies of organization, Ruskin proposed that similar organizational strategies were at work in literary texts.

This transference from visual art to literary texts was not convincing to me. Perhaps my scientific background in chemistry and my perennial love of machines were restricting my appreciation of Ruskin, an artistic type. But here’s where Traina’s wife, Jane, indirectly supplied the missing warrant! Jane reigned as the queen of the seminary bookstore for years. Many will remember her fondly for managing the sprawling collection of required texts and books relevant to the various

disciplines comprising seminary education. That larger inventory gave us students the opportunity to browse, discover titles that would not likely be found in a course bibliography or even in our library.

One day when browsing there, I happened upon a book whose title immediately seized my attention: *The Thread of Discourse*, by Robert Longacre. As I leafed through it, I came to its 5<sup>th</sup> chapter, entitled Rhetorical Predicates. Though this terminology was completely foreign to me, the substance of the chapter turned out to follow rather closely the list of structural laws Traina had taught us. I was both shocked and pleased to learn that linguists like Longacre had been working for some time at discerning the strategies that speakers and writers use to organize the successively higher levels of discourse beyond the grammar of the clause/sentence. I felt like the proverbial child in a candy shop! Through Longacre's bibliography and a few phone calls placed to some of these explorers, I was able to assemble a shelf of works written by scholars (loosely called Discourse Analysts) that fed my curiosity and understanding of how "texts" are in fact something like "textiles," whole cloths that are united by specific kinds of threads. It was not so much that I had overthrown Ruskin's insights, but that I had discovered a more convincing different basis for, and an analysis of, the structural laws I had been taught.

Through these Discourse Analysts, three key convictions took shape: First, these structural relationships were cross-cultural, cross-temporal, and cross-generic. The inductive work of many linguists examining all sorts of texts convincingly persuaded me that discourse (i.e., whether oral or written products) of all types, from all cultures, and across the ages is constructed of materials bound together by means of these relationships, these logical connections. Second, these structural relationships are surprisingly limited in number (though allowance needs to be made for their exact number, given that some can be joined together or perhaps subdivided). And the limitation in number is due, not to an arbitrary decision by an authoritarian cadre of

legislators, but by the nature of the human mind and the limited number of logical maneuvers constituting human thought. (Here I was also fed by the work of Stephen Pinker, evolutionary cognitive psychologist.) And if these things are true, then (third) our use of these relationships to analyze biblical texts is not a modern imposition upon Sacred Scripture, but a valid tool, just as useful and appropriate for interpreting the Bible well as is (sentence/clause) grammar itself. These convictions created the degree of confidence I needed to forge ahead along these lines without any lingering doubts about them.

When in the providence of God I was admitted in 1986 into the doctoral program at Union Theological Seminary (in Virginia), my hopes were already primed for writing a dissertation that would allow me to perform a serious textual analysis upon a biblical book in light of Discourse Analysis and the structural relationships that were common to it and my underlying instruction from Traina. Again in the providence of God (I am convinced), I was blessed in specific ways by two scholars who had a direct hand in making this dream possible. The first is David Bauer, who had completed his own dissertation at the same institution just a few years earlier. Especially significant to me was that Bauer had written his dissertation (on the book of Matthew) employing the structural laws as presented by Traina to analyze the literary structure of that Gospel, the very “laws” that I had now come to fully embrace.

But what made it possible for me to follow Bauer’s lead was the role that Jack Dean Kingsbury played for both of us. Kingsbury, a world-class Matthean scholar who had cut his teeth on Redaction Criticism, had shifted to Narrative Criticism as the primary lens through which he would analyze all three Synoptic Gospels. Bauer had become one of Kingsbury’s most important proteges, just as Bauer had earlier become Traina’s most important protégé. Kingsbury’s commitment to narrational analysis was nicely compatible with Bauer’s approach to textual analysis as inherited largely from Traina. And so when I stepped



on Union's campus in the fall of 1986, Kingsbury rather smoothly adopted me as his advisee, and (eventually) as his mentoree when I would undertake to write my own dissertation analyzing the literary structure of Luke's Gospel. Though Bauer identified himself more explicitly within Narrative Criticism and I more within Discourse Analysis, the degree of methodological overlap between us was huge, given that we both were appealing fundamentally to the structural relationships/laws that Traina had taught us.

I was completely surprised by another delightful providence in being invited to join the Biblical Studies faculty at Asbury Theological Seminary in December of 1988. My title (Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies) was broad enough to allow me to teach in any department of the Division of Biblical Studies (now School of Biblical Interpretation), but my assigned courses through the years have largely been in the Department of Inductive Bible Study. For over 30 years now, I have been privileged to teach (in IBS format) the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of John, the Epistle to the Romans, a collection of smaller Pauline Epistles (Gal., Eph., Phil., Col.), and the Pentateuch. As every teacher will quickly report, there's no more potent way of learning a subject well than by teaching it. And so my own insight into these biblical books, along with my own skill in presenting and practicing IBS methodology, have grown exponentially over these three decades. Perhaps here I should voice my deep appreciation to my students over the years whose presence in my classrooms supplied me not only with strong motivation to teach well but with substantial input to my own thinking. Their work (submitted in the form of assignments) and their questions (both during and after class sessions) were something like upper and lower millstones that ground the grain of my thoughts into a more refined and valuable product over the years.

I'm glad I was not recruited to serve as a lone wolf in this teaching role. Rather, I was placed within a department (IBS) alongside David Bauer and David Thompson, amazingly talented and insightful

practitioners of the IBS method. I can only wish others the rare privilege of being teamed with colleagues (mentors, to a large degree) sharing the same outlook, supporting each other in spirit, and working together toward improving their common craft. [In recent years following the retirement of (the late) David Thompson, Michael Matlock has been added to our ranks and enriches our joint mission in his own important ways.] Few things are more invigorating than hashing out matters of theology, methodology, and pedagogy with fellow scholars aimed in the same general direction. Though we made every effort to “dance together” in our teaching approaches so as to enable students to see our common commitments, there was at the same time appropriate freedom to adjust and adapt the “received” approach to reflect certain of our individual interests and convictions.

I will resist the temptation of descending into greater detail about any phase of the story I’ve just sketched out. These broad strokes should be sufficient, I hope, for communicating my leading thought, that at every step along the way I have been the recipient of rich, diverse, gracious divine providence. The disposition with which I was born, the heritage and modeling of my parents and grandparents, vitally important intersections with key books and resources, educational institutions that provided settings conducive to learning, mentors who gave gifts of inestimable value, and colleagues who were the “iron sharpening iron” in my life—all of these have beautifully conspired to shape to my ministry and calling as a teacher of the Bible, largely through the avenue of Inductive Bible Study. It should be evident that I fervently hope that many more students and teachers will be raised up who both value and advance this approach—which has so deeply blessed me—for studying the Scripture and serving the church.